



To Cross the Border of the West

Mateusz Fałkowski

The author is a sociologist, Research Fellow at the Institute of Public Affairs

The citizens of the EU countries perceive Poland as a backwater and Poles as a backward nation, they feel no solidarity which would appeal to our common European past. Entering the Union, synonymous with Poland's crossing the symbolic and yet very real border, may help improve our image in the West and generate the sense of solidarity with Poles among Western Europeans. Without finding its place on the western side of the *limes* Poland will still be identified with the backward East, no matter how high our economic growth will happen to be.

The Poles started to realise the importance of the country's brand and the image of its inhabitants when they faced the perspective of the EU extension and the global necessity to struggle to be in foreign investors' good graces. The research of the Institute of Public Affairs (ISP) conducted in Austria, Germany, France, Spain, Sweden and Great Britain has provided a lot of answers and posed new questions. It shows the long duration of opinions deeply rooted in history, relatively little knowledge or interest in Poland, and – on the other hand – indicates the areas in which positive changes occur and greater openness to Poland can be observed. The answer to the question about the Western image of Poland and Poles proves to be complex, sometimes discouraging and sometimes optimistic. All the Western European societies in which the research was conducted manifest a certain dualism – a friendly and open view on an individual, accompanied by a negative image of the country and apprehensions regarding Poles *en masse* (as a faceless crowd, posing certain threats, e.g. on the labour market to mention but one).

Is Poland associated with „ Solidarity” and economic growth?

The Polish discussions on shaping the country' s image often involved suggestions that the image should be related to the „ Solidarity” movement, the successful free market reforms of the 1990s or the tourist image of Poland as a country o hospitable people, beautiful landscapes and wild nature, a country to spend holidays in. The analysis of the ISP research shows that none of these elements are actually associated with Poland.

"Solidarity" and the political breakthrough of 1989 have been most often mentioned by the French (15%), much less frequently in Germany and Austria (5-7%).

The image of Poland as the economic tiger of Europe, even if admittedly present in Western Europe in the 1990s, was only noticed by the elites. The societies of the EU countries simply never noticed the dynamics of the economic growth and the successful Polish reforms. No more than 14% of the Spanish respondents, 16% of the Britons, 20% of the French and the Germans, 22% of the Austrians and 25% of the Swedes were aware of the rapid growth of the Polish economy. The statement that Poland enjoys the market economy similar to that of the Western countries was confirmed by 20% at best (9% of the Swedes, 13% of the Austrians, 15% of the Germans, 18% of the French and 19% of the British).

Western Europeans consider Poles to be a friendly nation, in most cases even more frequently than Poles themselves (about 45% of the Austrian, French and British respondents, 39% of the Germans). Quite a number, i.e. 12% of the Germans mention beautiful landscapes when asked about Poland. However, almost 10% of our neighbours refer to thefts, 8% of the Austrians generally talk about crime, and 8% of the French associate Poland with its cold climate and low temperatures. Consequently, the vast majority (67%) of the Germans asked whether they would like to go to Poland on holiday gave a negative response.

On the barbarian side of the *limes*

Negative associations and statements, accompanied by opinions indicating no interest in or knowledge of our country prevail in the image of Poland. 18% of the Germans and 24% of the Austrians, our close neighbours, have no associations with Poland. Western Europeans, on the other hand, if they do have any associations whatsoever, emphasise Poland' s being different, its backwardness and „ Easternness” . The East and the West are by no means a merely geographical differentiation, but a civilisational and cultural one. 8% of the French, compared to 12% of the Germans mentioned the word „ East” , 19% indicated poverty and unemployment. Over 60% of the French agree with the opinion that Poland is a backward country.

Describing Poland as belonging to the East and emphasising its backwardness is by no means new in the Western societies. It is deeply rooted in the Enlightenment tradition, so vital for the self-awareness of Western Europe. The Enlightenment thought is actually based on the dichotomy of „civilisation” and „barbarianism”. The relations of Western travellers from their sojourns in Poland in the 16th and 17th centuries clearly indicate what struck the authors of the travel diaries: lack of comfort, lack of civilisation, lack of good manners. Many of those arguments are still put forward today, often justifiably. The Polish state, society and economy were after all influenced by other traditions as well as the Western one. Since the 16th century until as late as the fall of communism, neither the economic system nor the social structure developed according to Western patterns. Thus, when the children of the French, German or British urban *bourgeoisie* – in gross oversimplification - render a judgement on Poland, it is formed on the basis of the often idealistic categories of the Enlightenment. That is one of the reasons why Poland's entering the EU is of such vital importance, also in symbolic categories – as it will help Poland fit on the Roman, Carolinian and Enlightenment-inspired side of the *limes*, on the side of „civilisation”, not „barbarianism”.

Mentioning the Polish Catholicism as one of Poland's most important characteristics is an example of the Western perception of Poland deeply rooted in history. These associations correspond with the preserved image of a Pole as a religious person (63% of the Austrians, 69% of the French, and 73% of the Germans). Obviously, describing Poles as religious is not evaluating, but it strikingly coincides with the perceived backwardness of Poland and Poles. The opinion that Catholicism is a factor which impedes modernisation seems to be especially common in Germany. The view that the Catholic church in Poland is too influential is shared by as many as 65 % of the German respondents (in most other countries by 30-40%).

The limited knowledge of Poland and the opinion that our country does not comply with Western standards is also demonstrated by the responses to questions about the shape and level of the Polish political system and Polish democracy. The apparently obvious fact that Poland – like Western countries – operates in a parliamentary system is noticed by no more than 33% of the Austrians, 32% of the Germans, 28% of the French, 18% of the Britons, 17% of the Spaniards and 8% of the Swedes. The fact that Poland respects civic freedoms is no more obvious – known to one third of respondents at best (Austria). Western societies, even if they have noticed the occurrence of some changes in Poland, have little knowledge of what they consisted in.

A Pole – backward, religious and – all in all – hard-working

More than ten years after the downfall of communism, Poland is still viewed as a country failing to comply with the Western social, economic and political standards, as a different country (just the same way the Poles are different from Western Europeans). For the West, Poland means East, and it more than just a geographical tautology.

The image of Poles in the Western European societies is not very different from the self-stereotype of the Poles themselves. The Poles have a very ambiguous and often critical view of themselves. Similarly numerous groups indicate the contradictory characteristics of the Polish society, claiming that we are lazy and hard working, tolerant and intolerant, responsible and irresponsible.

It is worth noting, however, that 65% of the French and 54% of the British claim that Poles are hard-working, between 43 and 56% of the French mention the Polish effectiveness, responsibility and discipline. The French (and, to a considerable extent, the British) have a good or even very good, „ Western” image of Poles, much better than the Germans or Austrians. No more than 20-30% of people in Germany or Austria are ready to talk of the Polish laboriousness or discipline. There appears to be a very clear coincidence between the very good opinions of the Germans or Austrians of themselves (they all ascribe these characteristics to themselves to a very high extent). What seems striking about the French is the fact that while they are ready to admit that Poles have the aforementioned positive characteristics, it does not mean that the French are willing to describe the Poles as modern. Such an opinion is only shared by 20% of the French; 40% of them claim that Poles are backward. In contrast, the French consider themselves modern (77%). What characteristics would Poles have to have to be called modern by the French? Whatever the characteristics could be, Poles will still be regarded as backward for some time; it's their fate, the fate of the people from the East, whose ancestors used to emigrate for economic reasons to work in French mines. This is not in any opposition to the sympathy which the French have for us, though the Polish economic growth and increasing effectiveness of work will not be enough to overcome the image of a backward Pole. What is also necessary is the symbolic crossing of the line between „ civilisation” and „ barbarianism” , i.e. the extension of the European Union.

The Germans were the only nation which mentioned „ different mentality” among their associations with Poland (9%). Among the responses to an open question about what seems to divide the Poles and the Germans, the mentality was the most common (21%), more so than e.g. the different economic potentials (13%). The Germans emphasise the different culture, state model and society more frequently than other Western European nations.

Moderate sympathy

The citizens of the EU countries show no particular antipathy for Poles. It is interesting, especially in the face of the European aspiration of Central European nations, to compare the level of sympathy and antipathy for the Poles, the Czech and the Hungarians. In Great Britain and France, sympathy for Poles is greater than for the Czech and the Hungarians (in Great Britain the difference between the sympathy for Poles and for the Hungarians is 12 percentage points), whereas in the German-speaking countries, i.e. in Germany and Austria, the level of sympathy expressed for the Hungarians is much higher (55% in Austria, compared to 22% for the Czechs and 21% for Poles; in Germany 55% compared to 35% for the Czechs and 31% for Poles).

No more than 31% of the Germans declare their sympathy for Poles, whereas 24% declare antipathy. The antipathy for Poles is the strongest in Austria, reaching 33%. Though the Austrians definitely more often than other respondents emphasise their antipathy or our negative characteristics, it does not translate into their great distance towards us. They would to a surprisingly high extent be ready to accept the presence of a Pole in various areas of their everyday lives (family, neighbourhood, work). This rule can be observed in all the societies in which the research was conducted. The respondents find it easier to accept a Polish person as a family member or a friend – i.e. on private grounds. It would be considerably more difficult in the public sphere. In Germany the consent to grant a Pole the citizenship was as just 45%, compared to 48% in Austria, in Spain it reached 77%.

The image and the enlargement

Both the apprehensions and hopes connected with the EU enlargement seem to focus mostly on Poland. Nevertheless, Western Europeans are basically ready to support the extension. The Eurobarometr research shows the gradual growth of the support for the idea of the EU extension. The research of the autumn of 2001 was the first to indicate that the support for the extension had crossed the magic barrier of 50%. The only country in which a higher percentage opposes the extension (46%) than supports it (39%) is France.

The rapid modernisation and „westernisation” of Poland and Poles in the 1990s was not enough to make Western Europeans treat Poland as modern and western. The best we can get is sympathy. The results of the ISP research seem to indicate that apart from the intensive effort on the part of Poles and the modernisation changes, what is also necessary is our crossing the symbolic border of the West, i.e. entering the European Union.

The article was published in "Rzeczpospolita" (September 3, 2002) and is to be published in "The Polish Foreign Affairs Digest"